

# **Small Steps Study Guide**

## **Small Steps by Louis Sachar**

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# Plot Summary

This novel is the story of Theodore Johnson, an African-American teenager struggling to rebuild his life after a brief spell in a youth correctional facility. The novel portrays Theodore's struggles to sort through the conflicting influences of his two best friends and his unexpected involvement with a famous pop star. In addition, the book explores themes relating to trust, the corrupting allure of money, and the need to let go of the past in order to embrace the future.

As Theodore works at a new job, the author explains how he came by the unusual nickname of Armpit (the result of an encounter with a scorpion) and how he came to be in the correctional center (the result of a violent encounter with a couple of teasing teenagers). Work is interrupted first by the arrival of X-Ray, Armpit's best friend and fellow "guest" of the correctional facility, with a money-making proposal - scalp a dozen tickets for an upcoming concert by touring pop sensation Kaira DeLeon. Armpit, who is trying to turn his life around, is initially reluctant, but eventually agrees. Later, he runs X-Ray's plan past his neighbour and best friend, a young white girl named Ginny who is struggling with cerebral palsy. She warns him to be careful, and Armpit resolves to try, but nevertheless continues with the plan, helping X-Ray purchase twelve tickets.

Meanwhile, the narrative also follows Kaira as she travels across the country, exploring her relationships with her band (a collection of old time rockers that are just collecting a paycheck) and her arrogant, bossy, and dishonest manager, whom she has nicknamed El Genius.

As the date for Kaira's concert draws closer, X-Ray sells more and more of the tickets. At the same time, Armpit works up the nerve to ask a girl at school, Tatiana, to go to the concert with him. At first she agrees, but then later, apparently under the influence of her friends (who think she shouldn't be going out with someone with a criminal record) she changes her mind. Armpit then impulsively asks Ginny and she says yes, and X-Ray hands over a pair of tickets in spite of having a customer offering two hundred dollars a ticket for them. At the concert, Armpit is shocked to discover that his tickets are forgeries. As he struggles to prove what he believes to be true, he is manhandled by police, and Ginny suffers a seizure. Only the intervention of a city official saves Armpit from being arrested, and he and Ginny are taken to the concert's medical center, where they are visited by Kaira, who heard about their story from a laughing El Genius and who offers them seats on the stage. The ecstatic Ginny and Armpit have a great time at the concert, afterwards visiting Kaira backstage and Armpit finding himself attracted to her.

The next day, after confronting X-Ray about the tickets, Armpit has lunch at her hotel with Kaira, the two of them sharing an attraction to each other. A short time later, a police investigation into the forged tickets begins, leading Armpit and X-Ray into a series of lies to protect themselves and each other from criminal prosecution. Meanwhile, Kaira invites Armpit to visit her at her tour stop in San Francisco, and El Genius makes arrangements to put his plan for stealing Kaira's income into action.



When he arrives in San Francisco, Armpit and Kaira initially have a great time, but an argument ends with Kaira storming back to her hotel, where she is attacked by El Genius. Armpit, having followed her with the intention of apologizing, breaks up the attack, but not without injury to himself. Back at home, pestered by the media, Armpit is relieved to learn that the police investigation into the forged tickets is being dropped, and is able to resume his determined efforts to rebuild his life.



# Chapters 1 through 4

## Chapters 1 through 4 Summary

This novel for young people is the story of Theodore Johnson, a teenager struggling to rebuild his life after a brief spell in a youth correctional facility. As the novel portrays his Theodore's struggles to sort through the conflicting influences of his two best friends and his unexpected involvement with a famous pop star, narration also explores themes relating to trust, the corrupting allure of money, and the need to let go of the past in order to embrace the future.

In Chapter 1, African-American teen Theodore Johnson has been given the nickname Armpit because venom from a scorpion bite infected his armpit. As he digs in the lawn of Austin mayor Cherry Lane, narration describes how Armpit got used to digging holes during his time at a juvenile detention center, how he ended up at the center (following an altercation with a couple of other teenagers over some spilled popcorn that ended with them in hospital) and how, after three years there and extensive counseling, he has resolved to reform his life. A counselor, narration comments, advised him that life after an experience like Armpit's had to be taken with small steps, and narration further describes the first five steps Armpit had resolved to take. After a brief visit from Mayor ane, in which she and Armpit respectfully compliment each other and dance to the radio provided by Armpit's boss, playing music by young singer Kaira DeLeon, Armpit gets back to work.

In Chapter 2, Armpit's work is interrupted by his friend from the detention center, the slick X-Ray, who tries to convince Armpit to go in with him on what he says is a sure business deal. Armpit, reluctant to let go of the cash he has struggled to save, at first resists. But when he hears that X-Ray's plan involves Kaira DeLeon, he starts to listen. Narration then turns its attention to Kaira herself, a hot African-American pop star currently on a national tour, whose only real comfort, in the succession of anonymous hotel rooms she inhabits is her stuffed toy, nicknamed Pillow. Narration describes the members of Kaira's entourage, which includes her much resented bodyguard Fred and her agent / manager / stepfather, who has nicknamed himself El Genius. Narration also describes how Kaira's life has been threatened by an anonymous letter writer named Billy Boy, and how she's received several marriage proposals but never had a boyfriend. Narration then returns to Armpit and X-Ray, who explains his plan to buy tickets for Kaira's concert in Austin and then resell them for large amounts of money - in other words, scalping. He convinces the reluctant Armpit to go along with the plan by telling him how much money scalped tickets went for at Kaira's concert in Philadelphia.

In Chapter 3, when he gets home, Armpit hangs out with his neighbor Ginny, a young girl with cerebral palsy who, much to the surprise of them both (not to mention his parents) has become one of Armpit's best friends. When he tells her of X-Ray's plan, she comments that Armpit can't trust everything X-Ray says, and narration comments that Armpit agrees. After dropping Ginny off on her side of the duplex their two families



share, Armpit goes into his kitchen and gets into an argument with his father and his mother.

In Chapter 4, the next morning, as Armpit gets ready for school (his thoughts continually returning to Tatiana, a girl he likes) he's interrupted by a call from X-Ray, who tells him he needs more money to cover the service charge on the tickets. At school, Armpit says hello to Tatiana, but she responds coolly. Later though, when he makes a joke about an assignment for public speaking class (writing a campaign speech for a stuffed animal running to be ruler of the world), she laughs. Armpit's only other class is an economics class which, narration comments, he has trouble understanding. Narration then switches back to Kaira, grilling El Genius and her extravagant mother about what happens to her money. She is surprised to learn that the report about high prices paid to scalpers in Philadelphia was a story planted by El Genius, and angry when her mother insists that she listen to him. "He's made you what you are," she says.

## Chapters 1 through 4 Analysis

This section of the narrative introduces many of its key elements - the central character (Armpit), his situation (struggling to improve his life), the obstacle to that situation (the dodgy scheme proposed by the slick X-Ray), Armpit's eventual love interest (Kaira), his best friend and confidante (Ginny) and, perhaps most importantly, the work's central theme. This is the idea of taking small steps, an image that manifests both physically (i.e. in the small steps taken by the physically challenged Ginny) and psychologically (i.e. for Armpit as he makes careful plans to move away from his past and into a more promising future, one small step at a time). The novel's secondary themes are also introduced in this section, its examination of issues around trust manifesting in Armpit's uneasiness about X-Ray's plans and in Kaira's uneasiness about El Genius, while its examination of issues around the allure of money manifest in both X-Ray's plan and Armpit's eventual agreement to participate in it.

Other important elements introduced in this section include the story of how Armpit got his nickname, which can be seen as significant symbolically as well as personally and the introduction of one of the elements (the stuffed animal) that creates the parallels between Ginny and Kaira (see "Topics for Discussion - Identify the various parallels, literal and metaphorical, between ...". There are also several notable pieces of foreshadowing. The first is the appearance of Mayor Cherry Lane and the brief connection she and Armpit share. This foreshadows her reappearance at a key point of the narrative in Chapter 15. The second important piece of foreshadowing in this section is the narration's reference to the anonymous threatening letters being sent to Kaira, which foreshadows the receipt of another letter (Chapter 19) and the revelation of who exactly the letters are coming from (Chapter 34). A third, and related, piece of foreshadowing is the reference to El Genius' lie about the high-priced tickets, which foreshadows the revelation (again in Chapter 34) that he has created and sustained the lie about Kaira being talked by Billy Boy.



# Chapters 5 through 9

## Chapters 5 through 9 Summary

In Chapter 5, Armpit and X-Ray get into line for Kaira DeLeon tickets, Armpit bringing with him an economics textbook so he can study for an exam he has later that day. Behind them are several street people who, it turns out, have been paid by a pair of professional scalpers named Felix and Moses to stand in line for them. After X-Ray and Armpit buy their tickets (six each, which aren't as good as X-Ray planned they'd be), the guys talk to Felix, who tries to convince them to sell them their tickets at a good price, his arguments triggering, for Armpit, sudden insight into the economic process. X-Ray refuses Felix's offer, convinced that he and Armpit will be fine on their own. Later, while dropping Armpit off at school, X-Ray asks for more money to put an ad in the paper to publicize the availability of the tickets.

In Chapter 6, walking home from school, Armpit encounters a man who crosses the street to avoid him, something that happens to him regularly but which today doesn't bother him. Thanks to his time in the line and the understanding it gave him into economics, he got a ninety on his exam, a fact he celebrates with Ginny on their daily walk. He also asks to borrow one of her stuffed animals for his public speaking class. After describing her animals (each of them have some kind of disability), Ginny tells him the best choice would be Coo, a human with rabbit ears, who makes her feel better than all the other animals. Armpit is reluctant, but Ginny insists, explaining that Coo has leukemia, "but we don't talk about it."

In Chapter 7, the next day, after struggling with a newspaper vending machine that eats his coins, Armpit buys a paper and discovers that X-Ray is advertising the tickets at \$135. Armpit calls him angrily and demands that the price be lowered, but X-Ray tells him he's just had an offer at that price, and Armpit agrees to leave the price as it is. Later at work, Armpit struggles to pull a plant out of the ground and eventually succeeds, feeling a kind of satisfaction in his accomplishment that, he thinks, scalping tickets can never duplicate.

In Chapter 8, Ginny, impressed and excited about how much money Armpit stands to make, accompanies him to his meeting with X-Ray to collect the money. X-Ray, however, tells Armpit that the guys wanting to buy the tickets (two overweight white guys) brought a check, which X-Ray refused, making arrangements to meet them later in a public parking lot. In spite of having homework and his speech to prepare, Armpit agrees to join him. After writing the speech (which he takes very seriously, wanting to win for Ginny's sake), Armpit meets X-Ray in the parking lot. The white guys are late, but pull up just as X-Ray and Armpit are leaving. X-Ray shouts at them and keeps on going, ignoring Armpit's pleas to stop so they can get their money. "If you don't sell the tickets," Armpit says, "I'm going to kill you." X-Ray responds by laughing and calling him a joker.



In Chapter 9, on his way to school, Armpit is stopped by a carload of teenagers that he doesn't really want to have anything to do with. He manages to avoid their invitation to join them, deflects their taunting curiosity about Coo and their negative comments about Ginny, and continues on his way, in spite of being called "fool" as they go. At school, Armpit nervously gives his speech, sticking to his intended plan even though some of his classmates laugh at what he says. He comments that Ginny is the bravest and strongest person he knows, and if the strength and support of Coo can do that for her, who knows what he could do for the world. That, he says, is why Coo should be elected. After class, Tatiana tells him she liked his speech, even though he was nervous, and says she's going to vote for Coo. Their conversation is interrupted by the arrival of X-Ray, who counts hundreds of dollars into Armpit's hand, much to the increasing dismay of Tatiana, who leaves. The tickets, X-Ray says, were sold to a white woman who wanted to buy them for her kid's birthday. Armpit doesn't get the full amount he's owed, however - X-Ray borrowed some to meet other expenses.

## Chapters 5 through 9 Analysis

Among the important elements of this section is the development of the parallel experiences between Armpit, Ginny, and the stuffed animals.

Other key elements here include developments of the novel's themes. The first, escaping the past, is explored and commented on in several ways. The first is in the opening images of Chapter 6, in which the man crossing the street is portrayed as, and seen by Armpit as, avoiding him because of his criminal history. The key point here is that Armpit chooses not to react - that is, he's no longer reacting negatively to those who do react negatively to his past. In other words, he's moving on. Another important point to note about this near-confrontation is that the narrative makes no comment about the man's race (i.e. whether he's black or white), thus avoiding the interpretation that his avoidance of Armpit is based on something other than the latter's past. Meanwhile, Armpit's determination to move beyond his past also manifests in his avoidance of the teenagers in the car, all of whom he knows from his previous life and all of whom are living and/or behaving in ways that he no longer wants to participate in. In this case, he physically takes "small steps" (i.e. walking around the car blocking his way) to avoid and escape his past.

During all of this, the plot of the book continues to move forward with the purchase of the tickets and the enacting of the plan to scalp them. Here it's interesting to note how, in the latter part of this section and in many of the sections that follow, there is a clear and engaging sense of suspense. The reader is lured into wondering, at almost every turn of the page, when something is going to go wrong for Armpit - not whether, but when. It takes a while, until Chapter 15, but between this point and that, the reader is, for lack of a more original phrase, waiting for the other shoe to drop - in other words, waiting for the bad thing that the narrative at this point is clearly setting up to actually happen. A related point is the narrative glimpse of the plant Armpit is digging up, the description of which can be seen as metaphorically echoing/foreshadowing the complicated web of trouble Armpit is getting into more and more deeply.





Then there are the developments in the relationship with Tatiana, which blows cold within seconds of it suddenly heating up. This change in temperature is clearly the result of X-Ray's tactless actions with the money, which just as clearly suggest to Tatiana that something underhanded is going on. Her reaction here clearly foreshadows her actions in Chapter 13, in which she backs out of her date with Armpit for reasons that may not be what she says they are.



# Chapters 10 through 13

## Chapters 10 through 13 Summary

In Chapter 10, as the Kaira DeLeon show travels through Texas Kaira, desperate for company, leaves her own lavishly equipped bus to hang out with the band (all old time rock and rollers) in theirs. Their comments about Bob Dylan and Janis Joplin meet with confusion from Kaira, but when they start playing Joplin over the sound system, she immediately connects with the singer's raw, bluesy emotion. Meanwhile, the guys in the band drop heavy hints that El Genius is having an affair with Aileen, the tour manager. Kaira, who has been helped by Aileen in the past, finds the rumor hard to believe, but hopes that it were true so that her mother (married to El Genius) would get a divorce. In Houston, Kaira looks at Aileen, who is checking them all into their rooms, for signs of betrayal, but finds none.

In Chapter 11, Armpit and X-Ray travel to a restaurant in another part of Austin to unload another pair of tickets, Armpit nervously aware that on the back of the tickets, there is a warning that the tickets cannot be resold. At the restaurant Murdock, the owner, gives them free lunches on the house and plays Kaira's latest hit on the jukebox, saying that he wants to give his daughter, whom he only sees once a month, a special present. As Armpit eats his lunch and reflects that he's now made all his money back, Armpit listens to Kaira's lyrics.

In Chapter 12, back at Armpit's school, and shortly after four more of the concert tickets are sold, the last two stuffed animal campaign speeches are given. The vote is taken, and the winners are the subjects of the last two speeches. Armpit's disappointment (at Coo's not winning for Ginny) is eased by Tatiana's telling him he gave the best speech. Impulsively, hoping that X-Ray hasn't sold the last two tickets, Armpit invites Tatiana to join him at the concert. When she agrees, Armpit hurriedly tracks down X-Ray, who tells him the tickets are still available and jokes about how seriously Armpit is attracted to Tatiana.

In Chapter 13, Ginny accepts Coo's loss calmly, but reacts with pride when Armpit tells her that he got an A in his speech. Meanwhile, Tatiana is hanging out with her friends Claire and Roxanne, who trash talk Armpit. On the day of the concert, Armpit comes home from work to discover that Ginny has been upset by a comment from her mom that Ginny has taken to mean that her father left because of her disability. Armpit comforts her by saying that her father must have some kind of disability in his soul, his comments interrupted by the arrival of his mother with the telephone - he has a call from Tatiana. She tells him that because of a family commitment, she's unable to go to the concert. Armpit tells her he understands, and then has an idea - he offers to take Ginny instead.



## Chapters 10 through 13 Analysis

Among the important, intriguing elements in this section is the continued foreshadowing of something bad happening to Armpit as the result of getting involved with X-Ray's plan. Here, that foreshadowing takes the form of the reference to the comment on the back of the tickets that they can't be resold, a comment that suggests Armpit and X-Ray are going to get caught scalping. They don't, as the events in Chapter 15 eventually reveal, which means that the reference to the back of the tickets here is what is known as a "red herring", or false clue, leading the reader to thinking that one thing is going to happen, or that one thing is true, when in fact there's something else going on. This technique, commonly used in mystery stories, also comes into play in the book in terms of the Billy Boy subplot, which makes the reader (not to mention Kaira) think someone other than the real culprit (revealed in Chapter 33) is after her. On the other side of the coin are a pair of more direct foreshadowings. The first is the references to the affair between El Genius and Aileen (which foreshadows the truths revealed in Chapter 25), while the second is the visit paid by Armpit and X-Ray to the restaurant, events taking place there playing a key role in events in Chapters 15 and 23.

Other important elements in this section include the reference to Janis Joplin whose influence shows up again in Chapter 17. Here the important element to note is the connection between Joplin and Kaira. Joplin was known for the rawness and intensity of her music - she was not, as many popstars are and as Kaira comes across as being, pre-packaged and overly controlled. She was very much her own person, her own musician, an artist and free spirit. The reference to Joplin here, and Kaira's attempt to perform her music in Chapter 17, suggest that Kaira is moving towards becoming that sort of performer - or at least aspiring to be. In this context, it's important to note that as she attempts to make this kind of transformation into independence Kaira, like Armpit, is struggling to take "small steps," as she herself sings later in the narrative (see Chapter 36).

Finally, there are the scenes with Tatiana, the conversation she has with her friends and the subsequent telephone call. Although the narrative never explicitly draws the connection, there is the clear sense that the two are related, and that both are related to Tatiana's having witnessed the transaction between X-Ray and Armpit at the end of Chapter 9. In other words, there is the very clear sense here that Tatiana is lying when she says she has a family event to attend - what she's really saying is that she doesn't want anything to do with Armpit.



# Chapters 14 and 15

## Chapters 14 and 15 Summary

In Chapter 14, although Ginny's mother agrees to Armpit's taking Ginny to the concert, Armpit's parents are concerned, worried that he won't behave responsibly. Meanwhile, Armpit convinces X-Ray to let him have the tickets even though there's another customer on the phone offering two hundred dollars each. As the time of the concert draws closer and X-Ray hasn't turned up, Ginny's mother allows Armpit to take her car, and comments to Armpit's surprised mother that she (Armpit's mom) must be proud of him. Finally X-Ray shows up with the tickets and hands them over, warning Armpit to be "flexible".

In Chapter 15, when Armpit and Ginny arrive at the arena where the performance is being held, Armpit has so much difficulty finding a parking place that he is forced to use the handicapped sign Ginny's mom keeps in the car. He helps the excited Ginny inside, they purchase some popcorn and some drinks (Armpit reflecting uneasily on the last time he had popcorn - see Chapter 1), and make their way to their seats. There, he notices that Murdock (see Chapter 11) is nowhere around, and wonders why. Backstage, Keira (dressed in a warmup suit that conceals her skimpy, spangly costume) paces nervously, upset with her mother's drinking of a cocktail, the numbers of people in the area, and the obnoxious behaviour of El Genius. Back in the audience, a security guard asks to see Armpit's tickets. As he's searching his many pockets, the guard asks him to leave so the people who claim Armpit is sitting in their seats can sit. When Armpit, still looking for his tickets, refuses, the guard calls over a pair of police officers. Armpit finds the ticket stubs, the security guard looks at them and announces they're forged, Armpit reaches for them, and the police officers grab him and force him to the floor. Meanwhile, Ginny has a seizure, which the police believe is a reaction to drugs they think Armpit has given her. Armpit tries to get to his feet to help, but he is knocked to the ground. The Mayor appears and intervenes, Armpit appealing to her memory of his working for her. She orders the police officers to let him go, which they do. Armpit hurries to Ginny to comfort her.

Backstage, Kaira demands to know why the show is being delayed. The laughing El Genius tells her that a little girl is having "a spaz attack" and the "big black dude" with her is being beaten by the cops because they thought he gave her drugs and because he had counterfeit tickets. The angry Kaira asks where the people in question are.

In the medical area, Armpit comforts Ginny as the head police officer interrogates the two officers who captured him, both of whom insist that Armpit behaved in a threatening manner. The Mayor, who has remained in spite of repeated suggestions that she leave, pointedly asks whether they'd be acting this way if Armpit was white. As she is suggesting that the officers interrogate other people in the area to find out whether they bought tickets from the same scalper as Armpit, Kaira comes in to find Ginny, sits with her, asks what happened, and responds sympathetically when Ginny explains, saying



her body "went to red alert" in the crowd. Kaira invites her to watch the concert from backstage.

## Chapters 14 and 15 Analysis

The moment when Armpit's actions catch up with him, hinted at throughout the narrative, finally takes place in Chapter 15, but not in the way the reader has come to expect. Yes, Armpit gets into trouble, but not because he was involved in scalping tickets - because X-Ray got greedy with the last two tickets. Here, the narrative manifests its thematic interest in the alluring power of money. Also here, it's important to consider how, in some fundamental ways, there is little moral, essential difference between what X-Ray does to Armpit and what El Genius is later revealed to be doing to Kaira. The scope and level of violence are quite different, but the basic principles behind their actions are the same where greed rules.

Other important elements in this section include the Mayor's outright suggestion that the actions of the police are motivated and/or defined by racism (a narrative thread which, for the most part, is essentially dropped from the narrative after this chapter and the next one) and the appearance of the Mayor herself. This comes across as something of a *deus ex machina*, a term first used in Ancient Greek theatre to describe an incident in which conflict was resolved by the unexpected intervention of an all-powerful god, arbitrary but necessary for the story to be resolved how the author wanted it to be. Yes, the author of "Small Steps" has made an effort to establish at least some relationship between Armpit and the Mayor (Chapter 1), but there is the sense that the only reason that scene exists is to make the mayor's appearance here seem a little less unlikely. If that is in fact the case, the attempt doesn't really work - it seems highly unlikely that as important official as the mayor, even one who enjoys Kaira's music as much as this one seems to, would be on the crowded floor of the stadium during a concert.

In any case, and whether the moment makes logical sense or not, the events of this section (the revelation about the counterfeit tickets, Armpit and Ginny's encounter with Kaira) are both key turning points of the narrative, its story changing direction at this point and taking Armpit, in bigger steps than are either comfortable or wise, down a path he never intended to take.



# Chapters 16 through 18

## Chapters 16 through 18 Summary

In Chapter 16, as Kaira ushers Armpit and Ginny backstage, she asks whether Armpit is Ginny's nurse, and is embarrassed when he says he's just a friend, realizing that she made an assumption because Armpit was black. Kaira, who is also black, hands them over to a technician, who seats them behind the speakers and brings them drinks. The two of them watch and listen, with increasing excitement, as Kaira does her show, singing in a passionate way that no-one (including the newly enthusiastic band) had heard her sing before. Some of her songs have special meaning for Armpit, particularly the one that Kaira prefaces with commentary about her feelings about men. As the concert draws to a close, Kaira brings Armpit and Ginny out, saying that "a lowlife scalper" sold them forged tickets, which causes the audience to boo. She also introduces them, Armpit giving his name as Theodore. When they have gone back to their seats, Kaira sings her final number and then her encore. Backstage, she and the band spontaneously decide to do one more encore - "Piece of my Heart" by Janis Joplin, which they had never performed together. The performance is a mess, but everyone is too happy and excited to care.

Chapter 17 - After the concert, Ginny and Armpit make their way through a bustling crowd of technicians and assistants to Kaira's dressing room, where they see her arguing with a large black man about whether she should have sung the Janis Joplin song. She then invites them into her dressing room where, over ice cream, she reveals that the man was her stepfather and that she can't stand him. As they chat, Ginny reveals that Armpit was in a correctional facility, and the embarrassed Armpit explains why. Ginny asks whether she can tell Kaira his nickname and he says no, but then Kaira and Ginny whisper in each other's ears, and Armpit becomes uncomfortable. Band member Cotton comes in, and announces that El Genius has just fired him for letting Kaira sing the Joplin song. The outraged Kaira promises to hire him back as soon as she turns eighteen and can legally fire El Genius, and Cotton, after thanking her, leaves. Shortly afterwards, Armpit and Ginny leave, teasing each other about what Ginny and Kaira whispered, Ginny saying that all she told Kaira was that Armpit's nickname was a part of the body and Armpit asserting that whatever Ginny said it's all right, since he'll never see Kaira again. Ginny hints otherwise ...

Chapter 18 - When he and Ginny get home, Armpit receives a grilling from his parents for being out so late and for worrying Ginny's mom, although Armpit already knows that Ginny's mom was actually thrilled that Ginny had such a good time. Narration reveals that he told no-one what happened about the tickets, only saying that Ginny had a mild seizure and was taken to the infirmary, where she met Kaira. The next morning, Armpit is awakened by X-Ray. Remembering what happened the night before, the angry Armpit threatens him, but he (X-Ray) explains that he had already committed to meet a potential buyer for the tickets by the time Armpit had made up his mind to take Ginny to the concert. He sold the buyer the tickets, then used an all-night copy place to make



tickets for Armpit. As X-Ray is giving Armpit his share of the proceeds from the ticket sales, Kaira calls, inviting Armpit to lunch. Armpit asks X-Ray to give him a ride to her hotel.

## Chapters 16 through 18 Analysis

In Chapter 16, as Kaira ushers Armpit and Ginny backstage, she asks whether Armpit is Ginny's nurse, and is embarrassed when he says he's just a friend, realizing that she made an assumption because Armpit was black. Kaira, who is also black, hands them over to a technician, who seats them behind the speakers and brings them drinks. The two of them watch and listen, with increasing excitement, as Kaira does her show, singing in a passionate way that no-one (including the newly enthusiastic band) had heard her sing before. Some of her songs have special meaning for Armpit, particularly the one that Kaira prefaces with commentary about her feelings about men. As the concert draws to a close, Kaira brings Armpit and Ginny out, saying that "a lowlife scalper" sold them forged tickets, which causes the audience to boo. She also introduces them, Armpit giving his name as Theodore. When they have gone back to their seats, Kaira sings her final number and then her encore. Backstage, she and the band spontaneously decide to do one more encore - "Piece of my Heart" by Janis Joplin, which they had never performed together. The performance is a mess, but everyone is too happy and excited to care.

In Chapter 17, after the concert, Ginny and Armpit make their way through a bustling crowd of technicians and assistants to Kaira's dressing room, where they see her arguing with a large black man about whether she should have sung the Janis Joplin song. She then invites them into her dressing room where, over ice cream, she reveals that the man was her stepfather and that she can't stand him. As they chat, Ginny reveals that Armpit was in a correctional facility, and the embarrassed Armpit explains why. Ginny asks whether she can tell Kaira his nickname and he says no, but then Kaira and Ginny whisper in each other's ears, and Armpit becomes uncomfortable. Band member Cotton comes in, and announces that El Genius has just fired him for letting Kaira sing the Joplin song. The outraged Kaira promises to hire him back as soon as she turns eighteen and can legally fire El Genius, and Cotton, after thanking her, leaves. Shortly afterwards, Armpit and Ginny leave, teasing each other about what Ginny and Kaira whispered, Ginny saying that all she told Kaira was that Armpit's nickname was a part of the body and Armpit asserting that whatever Ginny said it's all right, since he'll never see Kaira again. Ginny hints otherwise.

Chapter 18 - When he and Ginny get home, Armpit receives a grilling from his parents for being out so late and for worrying Ginny's mom, although Armpit already knows that Ginny's mom was actually thrilled that Ginny had such a good time. Narration reveals that he told no-one what happened about the tickets, only saying that Ginny had a mild seizure and was taken to the infirmary, where she met Kaira. The next morning, Armpit is awakened by X-Ray. Remembering what happened the night before, the angry Armpit threatens him, but he (X-Ray) explains that he had already committed to meet a potential buyer for the tickets by the time Armpit had made up his mind to take Ginny to

the concert. He sold the buyer the tickets, then used an all-night copy place to make tickets for Armpit. As X-Ray is giving Armpit his share of the proceeds from the ticket sales, Kaira calls, inviting Armpit to lunch. Armpit asks X-Ray to give him a ride to her hotel.





# Chapters 19 through 21

## Chapters 19 through 21 Summary

In Chapter 19, X-Ray drives Armpit to the hotel, still doubting that he's meeting Kaira DeLeon. After being dropped off, Armpit has a nervous moment when he forgets the alias Kaira told him she was registered under, but manages to work it out and calls her room. A few moments later Kaira arrives, accompanied by Fred the bodyguard. The three of them go into the restaurant, Kaira insisting on a private table and trying to guess Armpit's nickname. Armpit refuses to tell her. After they order, their conversation is somewhat awkward, but then Kaira lures Armpit outside, where they play "ditch the doofus" (i.e. Fred) and run through the hotel's grounds, eventually slowing down to walk hand in hand. Kaira tells Armpit about her relationship with El Genius, and her plans to fire him. She also tells him about the Billy Boy letters (see Chapter 2), adding that she received one at this hotel. As she again tries to guess his nickname, he agrees to tell her if she promises to touch him in the place the nickname came from. After she agrees, he tells her, and she touches his armpit, discovering that he's ticklish. Their touching turns into a near kiss, interrupted by Fred.

In Chapter 20, the next day, Armpit is in the middle of describing what happened at the hotel to Ginny (who says he should have taken his chances and kissed Kaira) when he notices a white woman coming to his door. He goes out to her, discovers that she's a police detective (Debbie Newburg) there to ask about the concert tickets, and invites her into the house. There, he invents a story of how he ended up paying three hundred dollars for the tickets, how he met the seller (whom he describes as an overweight Iranian named Habib) in a busy parking lot, and learns that if the seller is caught, he'd only face jail time if he had a previous criminal record. After he goes, he wonders how someone so young could have become a police detective, and worries that "she might get hurt".

Chapter 21 - After Armpit tells X-Ray about his conversation with the detective, including the description of the fictional Habib, X-Ray reminds him they're in the situation together, both having made money off the ticket sales. He also assures Armpit that the police have more important problems to solve than a pair of counterfeit tickets. At school Tatiana misunderstands when Armpit tells her he went to the concert with another girl, and walks away from their conversation. Over the next few days, he is distracted by thoughts of Kaira, his hopes for her to call him interfering with his studying to the point where he fails an economics exam and stops worrying about his public speaking class. An evening of catch-up studying is interrupted by a phone call from Det. Newburg, who asks whether the man he bought the tickets from might have been named Felix, Moses, X-Ray ... or Armpit (she knows him only by his real name, Theodore). Armpit denies knowing anyone by any of those names. When the detective hangs up, Armpit realizes he's not going to get any studying done that night ...



## Chapters 19 through 21 Analysis

Important elements to note about this section include the reintroduction of Billy Boy into the narrative, again a foreshadowing (as was the case with the first reference to him in Chapter 2) of the ultimate, eventual revelation of his true identity and purpose in Chapter 33. Then there is the first appearance of Detective Newburg which, aside from the fact that her investigations come close to derailing Armpit's plans to improve his life, is notable also for the fact that the narrative makes the clear point that she is white. In a narrative which, on some notable occasions, makes the clear effort to conceal a character's race (Tatiana, the man in the street in Chapter 6), it's equally notable when a character's race IS pointed out. The fact that Detective Newburg is a white police officer visiting a black suspect seems to be making a statement about the relative power status of the races, but again, the narrative doesn't come right out and MAKE the statement. It's an aspect of the work that is both inconsistent and, at times, confusing.

Another confusing element about the narrative is the fact that even though he tells several lies (such as the one he tells here) and really DID participate in an illegal act (i.e. the scalping), Armpit does not face any consequences. Granted, he does save Kaira's life (see Chapter 33) but should that preclude him from facing consequences for his wrongdoing? It's important to note, however, that Armpit clearly DOES face the consequences of allowing his thoughts to become so full of Kaira that he loses track of his schooling and of the goals he has set for himself to reach, albeit in "small steps". These consequences seem to foreshadow the revelation Armpit experiences in Chapter 32.

Finally, there the inconvenient timing of Fred the bodyguard, which foreshadows two important events. The first Kaira and Armpit's more successful attempt to "ditch" him in the following section so that he doesn't again interrupt them in the way he does here. The second is his timely catching up with her in Chapter 33, at which point his interruption is welcome. When he butts in on that occasion, he saves her life.



# Chapters 22 through 25

## Chapters 22 through 25 Summary

In Chapter 22, Armpit gets a letter from Kaira, in which she says she's written him several letters but never actually mailed them. She tells him she misses him, that she thinks of him when she sings love songs, and that she actually liked touching his armpit - it made her feel "all goosey" inside.

In Chapter 23, a few moments after reading the letter a second time, Armpit gets a phone call from Det. Newburg, asking him to come down and watch while she interviews a suspect. He tries to get out of it, but she makes it happen. He's shown into a room with a two way mirror, and is surprised to see the suspect is X-Ray. At first X-Ray tries to lie his way out of having worked with someone to get the twelve tickets and denies all knowledge of anybody named Armpit. When confronted by Newburg's knowledge of the trip to Murdock's restaurant (Chapter 11), X-Ray tells her that he met a guy nicknamed Armpit through another guy named Felix, who stood with him in line and helped him by the twelve tickets, who insisted on a half share of the profits, and whose real name was Habib. After he's let go, Newburg asks Armpit for his opinion of X-Ray, whom Armpit says he's never met and whom, he adds, he believed. Newburg says she now knows how X-Ray managed to sell him the fake tickets. He's too gullible.

In Chapter 24, later that day, X-Ray calls Armpit to say he had a chat with Newburg and that everything's cool, but that he and Armpit should stay away from each other for a while. Armpit doesn't tell him that he watched the whole interview, but does tell him about the letter from Kaira ... who calls him that evening, apologizes for writing such a "lame" letter, and talks about how much she misses him. She also says that because she's embarrassed herself, Armpit has to tell her something embarrassing about HIMSELF. He confesses that when he listens to one of her songs ("Damsel in Distress", one of the songs she had said earlier that she wrote), he thinks she's saying his name. Laughing, Kaira tells him that she's not saying "Save me, Armpit / A damsel in distress," but "Save me I'm but / A damsel in distress." She then invites him to join her in San Francisco, where she's playing a trio of concerts, offering to fly him out in her private jet. Surprised and excited, Armpit agrees.

Chapter 25 - Ginny convinces Armpit to tell his parents about the trip, and as he's considering the consequences of going, he realizes that if he DOES go, he'll miss his final exam in economics. This doesn't stop him, however, from letting Aileen book him on a commercial flight to San Francisco. The narrative then shifts focus to Aileen who, narration reveals, has been embezzling millions of dollars from Kaira's trust fund with the help of El Genius who, narration also reveals, doesn't himself know how much Aileen has taken. Conversation between El Genius and Aileen reveals that El Genius has some kind of plan for seizing all of Keira's money, and that having Armpit there will help him realize that plan, especially since Armpit has a criminal record. Meanwhile, narration further reveals that Aileen has booked herself on a flight to Costa Rica under



an assumed name ... The chapter concludes with Kaira performing under an open sky, actually singing Armpit's misheard words to "Damsel in Distress"

## Chapters 22 through 25 Analysis

At this point, the book's plotting begins to become somewhat complicated, with several events in this section playing important roles in defining and/or motivating the action to come. Among the most important is the letter from Kaira and the fact that Armpit tells X-Ray, both events that make it difficult for Armpit, in the following chapters, to pursue either of his goals (i.e. to take small steps into his clean-living future, and to develop his relationship with Kaira). Then there is the addition of Felix to the false story told by Armpit and X-Ray, a falsehood that has serious consequences for both characters in the following section.

Also at this point, the narrative detours for a few pages into the lives of El Genius and Aileen, the narrative of which raises several suspense-triggering questions in the mind of the reader - what are they up to, what will happen to Kaira when/if she finds out, how does Armpit fit into their plans.

Other important elements include Newburg's darkly comic comment that Armpit is too gullible and the references to Kaira's song "Damsel in Distress," which is important for two reasons. First, she IS a damsel in distress, but has no idea how serious that distress actually is. Second, the fact that she writes her own songs can, like the earlier references to Janis Joplin, be seen as one of Kaira's own "small steps" towards claiming an independent artistic and personal identity.



# Chapters 26 through 29

## Chapters 26 through 29 Summary

In Chapter 26, while working on a complicated piece of underground plumbing, Armpit is visited by Felix, Moses and the beaten-up X-Ray. Felix tells Armpit that he's been visited by Det. Newburg who, thanks to X-Ray, thinks he's involved in the selling of the forged tickets. He tells Armpit he he wants to buy Kaira's letter from him, having learned about it from X-Ray, and says that if he gets the letter, he keeps quiet about what he knows about X-Ray and Armpit's involvement with the tickets. If he doesn't, he talks. After Felix leaves, X-Ray tells Armpit to do what he has to do, adding that he's prepared to accept the consequences of his actions. Before Armpit can respond his boss returns, is pleased to learn that Armpit solved the complicated plumbing problem so quickly, and not only offers him a promotion, but also offers X-Ray a job, saying he needs a lot of new employees. When X-Ray reveals he went to the same correction center as Armpit, the boss jokes that the boys from the center make the best diggers.

In Chapter 27, Armpit finds himself stuck in several dilemmas about whether to go to San Francisco, whether to study for his economics exam (the subject making no sense to him), what to do about Felix's demand for the letter, whether to allow X-Ray to go to jail. Paralyzed with indecision, he does nothing.

In Chapter 28, on the Friday morning of the proposed trip to San Francisco, Armpit wakes up having made his decisions. He feels guilty about letting down his boss and about blowing off his economics final, but he reasons that a chance to spend a weekend with someone like Kaira doesn't come along very often, and resolves to take that chance. On his way back from his speech exam, he's confronted by Felix and Moses, conversation revealing that Armpit has told them they'll get the letter on Monday. Moses tries to beat Armpit into handing the letter over right away, but Armpit, toughened by life at the correction center, fights him off. Their fight is interrupted by a cry from a passing limo driver that he's called the police. Felix and Moses run off and Armpit runs home, only to realize that the limo driver has been sent by Kaira to take him to the airport. He convinces the driver to wait, runs into the house and makes hurried preparations (including grabbing Kaira's letter and all the money from the ticket sales, and leaving a quick note for his parents) and gets into the limo. On the way to the airport, one of Kaira's songs comes over the radio. In it she sings of a man on a tightrope, jumping out of the frying pan and into the fire ...

In Chapter 29, flying first class to San Francisco, Armpit asks the man seated next to him, who is from that part of the world, whether he's been in an earthquake. The man calmly says he has, adding that all he or anyone else has to do is hide under a desk until the shaking passes. Armpit does not feel reassured. Later, after arriving at the luxury hotel and finding his way to his suite, Armpit is taking a shower when he gets a call from Kaira (which he's able to answer on the bathroom phone). Anxious to see him, she arranges to meet him later. Once he's cleaned himself up, Armpit heads for her



room, but is stopped by El Genius, who reintroduces himself (as Kaira's father) and invites Armpit, much to Armpit's surprise, into his room. El Genius insists that Armpit take a couple of swings with what El Genius says is a souvenir baseball bat. El Genius finally lets him go and Armpit heads for his rendezvous with Kaira, thinking the experience with the bat was a little weird. When he and Kaira finally meet, Fred the bodyguard is present, but Armpit pays him no mind - he gives Kaira a big kiss.

## Chapters 26 through 29 Analysis

The pressure mounts on Armpit throughout this section, both directly (in that he knows that it's being put on him) and indirectly (in that he doesn't know). The prime example of the former is the visit he receives from Felix and Moses, while the prime example of the latter is his encounter with El Genius. The latter encounter will, to the astute reader, seem as weird as it does to Armpit, given that El Genius has previously been portrayed as definitely up to something (see Chapter 25). What he IS in fact up to is revealed in Chapter 33 in the following section. Here it's interesting to take a closer look at Armpit's conversation on the plane about earthquakes, which can be seen as metaphorically representing the "earthquake" of plotting and manipulation he is flying into. Here the use of metaphor is similar to that in Chapter 7.

At this point in the narrative, and keeping in mind the references to the boys from the correctional center being the best diggers, it's interesting to note that Armpit and X-Ray are minor characters in a book by the same author called "Holes", a story of the correctional center and the "holes" dug by the boys there. The point is not made to suggest that "Small Steps" is a sequel and perhaps an extension might be a better way to look at it.



# Chapters 30 through 33

## Chapters 30 through 33 Summary

In Chapter 30, after a stop in the hotel gift shop where Armpit buys a sweatshirt to protect him from the cool, damp San Francisco air, he and Kaira take a cab ride, Kaira paying the cabbie to help them ditch Fred. Meanwhile, El Genius goes into Armpit's room (using a key provided by Aileen) and, wearing a pair of rubber gloves, pulls some hairs out of Armpit's brush and picks up a bandaid with some blood on it. He also takes a knife from the complimentary cheese platter the hotel had left. Elsewhere, Kaira and Armpit stroll through the city, enjoying a kiss and shopping for a present for Ginny.

In Chapter 31, Kaira takes Armpit into a funky coffee shop, where she orders a cappuccino and Armpit, too embarrassed to do otherwise, orders the same. When they're sitting down, Kaira tells Armpit that she admires how good he is with Ginny, confessing that she (Kaira) has to spend some time with a dying girl as part of a project sponsored by the Make A Wish Foundation, and doesn't know how to handle it. Armpit tells her to just be real, and they have an intimate moment together ... at which point Armpit starts to tell her about the situation with the letter back home, but is interrupted by a fan who asks for Kaira's autograph. The interruption over, Kaira asks what he was talking about, and in spite of feeling the moment has passed and being buzzed from the caffeine in his coffee, Armpit explains about the tickets and the letter, asking her to write another, less embarrassing letter that he can give to Felix instead of the original. Kaira reacts badly, thinking that he wants to make a profit off the letter and not really hearing when he says he just wants to keep his friend out of jail. She throws her coffee in his face and leaves.

In Chapter 32, Armpit makes his way back to the hotel from the coffee shop, beating himself up for making such a stupid series of choices. Meanwhile, Fred searches desperately for Kaira, remembering that the guy she's with (Armpit) does have a criminal record, and that nobody knows that much else about him.

In Chapter 33, in the shower getting ready for her show that night, Kaira cries when she thinks about what happened with Armpit. Meanwhile, El Genius comes into the room again wearing gloves and carrying the baseball bat. At the same time, Armpit arrives in his room and listens to a message left for him by Kaira, in which she tells him she's tired of being used, that she doesn't mind him selling the letter, and that she doesn't want to see him ever again. Back in Kaira's room, Kaira steps out of the shower and into a robe. Going into the main part of the room El Genius swings the bat and attacks. Kaira falls to the floor as he repeatedly bludgeons her. The attack is interrupted by the arrival of Fred, who is stabbed by El Genius with the knife from Armpit's cheese platter. A few moments later Armpit arrives. El Genius falls silent, hoping that he doesn't have to kill Armpit. Kaira, meanwhile, struggles for the strength to make a noise. Armpit announces that he's leaving the letter on the bar and that he's leaving. Kaira manages to pull a lamp off a table. Armpit comes further into the suite to investigate, and is attacked by El Genius,





who breaks Armpit's arm. Armpit fights back with his remaining good hand, knocking El Genius into unconsciousness.

## Chapters 30 through 33 Analysis

The attack on Kaira in Chapter 33, or perhaps more specifically Armpit's intervention in that attack, is the book's climax, its point of highest emotional, narrative, and thematic intensity. The narrative tension that has been building throughout the story, in terms of all three of the book's narrative lines (what's going to happen with the investigation of the tickets, what's going to happen between Armpit and Kaira, and what El Genius is actually up to) converge in Kaira's hotel room. Armpit is prepared to face the consequences of not handing over the letter and having Felix tell the truth about Armpit's involvement in the scalping scheme, at the same time he is preparing to face the consequences of letting Kaira down. In other words, he is taking steps to put himself back on the path he originally set out on - the question is, whether they're big steps or small ones. Since saving someone's life almost certainly qualifies as big, there is the sense here that Armpit is basically proving himself wrong - he said to himself on p. 234 that he'd taken too many big steps, but there is the sense here that steps of such size, when taken for a good reason, can be equally as effective in moving one's life in a positive direction.

Meanwhile, all of the book's three central themes also climax in this section. Armpit, in returning the letter, is clearly putting the past, and his mistakes, behind him and is prepared to move into whatever the future has in store. His actions prove to Kaira that he can, in fact, be trusted (considerations of trust being the book's second major theme), while El Genius proves to Kaira that she was right to not trust him completely. Finally, El Genius' attack is the book's most vivid, most intensely narrated manifestation of the book's third major theme - the allure of money, and the violence it can bring into a life or in this case, several lives.

Other important points to note about this section include the reference to Armpit's new sweatshirt and the coffee that Kaira throws on it, both of which show up again, but in a very different light, in the book's final chapter. Finally, there is the reference to the Make a Wish Foundation, an international charity that gives children dying of cancer or some other fatal illness the opportunity to have a last wish come true. This means that Kaira is essentially being asked to visit a dying person whom she's never met and has no emotional connection to. Her discomfort and almost casualness about the situation are perhaps understandable, but might also come across as a little bit jarring, given how completely and easily compassionate she was with Ginny.





# Chapters 34 through 36

## Chapters 34 through 36 Summary

In Chapter 34, in the chaotic aftermath of the attack, Armpit retrieves Kaira's letter and burns it in the fireplace. Meanwhile, Kaira and Fred are taken to hospital, El Genius is arrested, Kaira's concert that night is canceled, Armpit is interviewed four times by police ... and Aileen disappears. Back at home, Armpit tells Ginny everything that happened, the two of them safe inside the house now surrounded by reporters. Narration describes the various versions of what happened at the hotel that are being reported, with conversation between Armpit and Ginny revealing that Kaira is still in hospital, and in pretty bad shape. Det. Newburg arrives, tells Armpit that the case is closed, reveals that she knows who he is and what happened to the tickets, and that she figured he didn't know the tickets were counterfeit. After signing the cast on his broken arm, she leaves. Back in San Francisco, Kaira regains consciousness, notices the bodyguard by her bed, thanks him for saving her life, and then apologizes for treating him so badly.

In Chapter 35, "over the next two months," Armpit comes to realize how lucky was that things turned out the way they did, the evidence against him seeming overwhelming (see "Quotes, p. 251"). X-Ray, however, shows him how flimsy all that evidence actually was, and Armpit jokes that he should be a lawyer. Narration describes how the two friends are sitting with Ginny and her stuffed animals, commenting Armpit managed to write his economics exam after all, and got an A. Narration goes on to describe how El Genius won't get a trial because he confessed, how Aileen was arrested, how all Kaira's money disappeared, how the attack may have left Kaira without the ability to sing ... and how she has yet to get in touch with Armpit. Looking at Ginny's animals, all of whom (he remembers) have disabilities, Armpit reflects on what seems to be Kaira's disability, the lack of a voice ...

In Chapter 36, a while later, however, Armpit hears a new song by Kaira on the radio, in which she talks about being unable to recognize herself and about having to take "small steps" to find herself. She also refers to her life being unpredictable like "coffee stains on your sweatshirt", narration commenting that the stains are still on Armpit's sweatshirt. As the song finishes, Armpit realizes that Kaira may not be singing to him as much as about him. He hopes that he might see her again but thinks he'll be all right if he doesn't - he's got his own small steps to take.

## Chapters 34 through 36 Analysis

The book's last few chapters essentially consist of what is called "falling action," denouement, or events and information that resolve any unanswered questions or plotlines in the aftermath of the climax. Questions answered here include what happened to El Genius, what happened to Kaira and the bodyguard, and, perhaps most



importantly, what happened to Armpit after the attack. Here again, the question is raised of why Armpit doesn't face any consequences for what he did - specifically, scalp the tickets and lie to police. It's interesting to consider this question in a thematic context - if one accepts the previously discussed premise that, in essence, X-Ray and El Genius are really doing the same thing (i.e. taking desperate action to obtain more money), it's potentially problematic that El Genius seems about to receive the consequences of his actions, while Armpit and X-Ray go free. Is this a contradiction? Or a suggestion that there are no real black and white, absolutely assured rules, there are always shades of gray.

It's also interesting to consider the symbolic/metaphoric value of the coffee stains on Armpit's sweatshirt, both in terms of what they seem to mean to Kaira and what they mean to the overall narrative.

Interestingly, the narrative leaves one key question unanswered - the question of whether Kaira and Armpit will get together. The song lyrics and narration in Chapter 36 certainly suggest that that's a possibility, and perhaps even a strong one, but whether such an event is a probability remains tantalizingly unclear. It's interesting to note, however, that as the novel concludes, Armpit himself is not dwelling on the question. He's too busy plotting the next small steps to take him along his journey into adulthood and maturity by putting the past to rest and moving carefully into a new future.



# Characters

## Armpit (Theodore Johnson)

Armpit is the narrative's central character and protagonist. African-American, in his late teens, and physically imposing, Armpit is portrayed throughout the narrative as doing his best to turn his life around after a stay in a youth correctional center. In this, he and his story are the primary manifestations of one of the book's principal themes, the value of putting the past behind and working towards a better future. At the same time, Armpit is also portrayed as intelligent and ambitious, but also gullible and not consistently strong willed. He tends to find himself drawn to superficially appealing situations without taking the potential consequences into consideration. In this, he is also an embodiment of another of the book's primary themes, an exploration of the alluring power of money. Finally, he is vividly portrayed as compassionate and sensitive, aspects of his character that are most evidently on display in his relationship with the disabled Ginny, a younger white girl who lives next door. It is this side of him that embodies and manifests the book's third major theme, an exploration of the nature and necessity of trust. Ginny trusts Armpit completely, and he trusts her, their obvious mutual regard for each other not only strengthening their friendship but also serving as a trigger for Armpit's perhaps surprising relationship with pop star Kaira.

## Kaira DeLeon

African-American pop star Kaira, whose real name is Kathy Spears, is, like Armpit, striving to put her past behind her and become the kind of singer she wants/needs/is driven to be. Here it's worth noting that unlike Armpit, who starts the narrative knowing how thoroughly he wants to change, Kaira discovers the extent of what she wants to change as the story unfolds. She starts the story knowing that she wants to change her manager right at the beginning, but also discovers that she wants to change her style of music and performing. She also wants to change her style of living to become more authentic, free-spirited, and passionate, all in the style of a singer who seems to become a new role model for her, sixties rock star Janis Joplin. Kaira is portrayed throughout the narrative as being impulsive and emotional, something of a spendthrift and, in some ways, both naïve and spoiled. She also has strong, powerfully motivating streaks of both independence and compassion. She is, in short, discovering herself and her truth in the way Armpit is, both of them striving to take "small steps" to realize and/or manifest a new identity they don't necessarily understand, but know is both necessary and possible.

## X-Ray, Ginny

Slick, smooth talking X-Ray is Armpit's best friend from the correctional facility. X-Ray is African-American, always looking for a fast buck, an able liar, and intelligent but not



necessarily wise. There is the sense that unlike Kaira and Armpit, X-Ray isn't going to learn from his mistakes and isn't all that eager to improve his life in terms of anything other than money. He is, in many ways, a contrasting character to the two main characters, a touchstone, or measuring stick (at least for the reader, if not for Armpit himself) of the kind of life that Armpit is striving to move away from.

On the other side of the coin is Ginny MacDonald, Armpit's other best friend. She is white, younger than Armpit, and suffers from cerebral palsy, which means she has difficulty walking and talking, and also goes through occasional debilitating seizures. Her honesty, vulnerability, innocent playfulness and equally innocent enthusiasm for life and all its possibilities is, in many ways, the sort of life to which Armpit and Kaira both aspire and attempt to move towards, which is perhaps one reason why Armpit hangs around her so much and Kaira is so drawn to her.

There is a classic image of someone struggling between good and corrupt moral choices having an angel on one shoulder and a devil on the other. That image is quite appropriate here, with Ginny (the angel) on one of Armpit's shoulders and X-Ray (the tempting devil) on his other one.

## Armpit's Parents

These relatively minor characters are nevertheless important, in that they represent the negative repercussions of past actions that Armpit is striving to escape. Specifically, both Armpit's mother and father seem determined to believe and / or assume that the only person he is, and is capable of being, is the delinquent that got sent to a correctional facility. They seem unwilling and/or unable to accept and / or believe that he is capable of anything else. Their lack of trust is both a negative manifestation of one of the book's central themes and also a significant obstacle that Armpit has to overcome in order to realize his goal of living a better life.

## Tatiana

Tatiana is a pretty girl at Armpit's summer school, a girl whom he likes and wants to date and who seems to like him but who, perhaps like Armpit himself, seems to be easily led by the will and opinions of others. It's interesting to note that in a novel in which race seems to be an important element, albeit an inconsistently developed one, Tatiana's race is not mentioned.

## Felix, Moses

Professional scalpers Felix and Moses attempt to muscle in on X-Ray's scheme, are initially rebuffed, are later blamed (by X-Ray) for the forged tickets that get Armpit into trouble, and later make further trouble for both Armpit and X-Ray by demanding blackmail payment (in the form of Kaira's letter to Armpit) to keep silent. Theirs is a



classic brains and brawn partnership, with Felix supplying the brains and Moses the brawn.

## **The Mayor (Cherry Lane)**

Austin mayor Cherry Lane is an eccentric but moral, and ultimately essential, presence in the narrative. After meeting Armpit while he's working on landscaping her lawn, she proves an invaluable ally during his confrontation with the police over the forged concert tickets.

## **Det. Debbie Newburg**

Police officer Newburg is the young and attractive, but sharp as a tack, police investigator in charge of looking into the case of the forged concert tickets. Intelligent and charming, but steely when she needs to be, her interviews with Armpit and X-Ray put both on the alert for possible trouble, but both are able to talk their way out of it. Their lies and manipulation are not, however, good enough to fool her. She figures out the truth, but not until after she's been put on another case and is free to let any charges arising from her investigations of the tickets drop.

## **Fred (Kaira's bodyguard)**

Another relatively minor character with an important function, Fred is, at first, portrayed as a watchful, ever-present thorn in the side of the rebellious Kaira, but is eventually revealed to be something of a hero, as he risks his life to save Kaira's. He is, in that sense, both a key manifestation of the book's thematic emphasis on trust (i.e. as someone Kaira can trust completely) and, as such, a complete contrast to El Genius, whom Kaira cannot trust at all.

## **Aileen**

Aileen is another member of Kaira's entourage - specifically, her tour manager, the person responsible for making and supervising travel and accommodation arrangements. She is eventually revealed to be having an affair with El Genius, with whom she is plotting to take Kaira's money. She, like El Genius, is a manifestation of the darker side of the book's thematic interest in both the corruptive power of money and of trust.

## **Kaira's Band (Tim, Duncan, Cotton, Billy Goat)**

This quartet of old-time rock musicians is, at first, dismissive of Kaira and her music, playing with her only to pay the bills. Eventually, however, as Kaira becomes more and



more raw in her performances and more and more passionate about her work, the band develops a new, albeit grudging respect for her.

## **Janis Joplin**

Sixties rock star Janis Joplin, who died of a drug overdose in her early thirties, is an iconic figure in music. A rebel with a unique voice and stage presence, her passion for both singing and raw emotion honesty in that singing was and remains an inspiration for pop/rock musicians of both genders. Hearing a Joplin recording is, for Kaira DeLeon, a trigger for important realizations and similarly important decisions about how she wants to live her life and create her music.



# Objects/Places

## Austin, Texas

This is the city in Texas in which Armpit, Ginny, and X-Ray all make their home.

## The Duplex

This is the two-family dwelling where Armpit lives, with he and his parents in one half and Ginny and her mother in the other half. If it hadn't been for the house and the proximity between the two families that it engenders, Armpit and Ginny would never have met.

## Camp Green Lake Juvenile Correctional Facility

This is the facility to which Armpit and X-Ray are sent, a facility in which the primary activity for the youth living there is to dig holes in a dried lake bed. The camp is the setting for a well-known novel by the author of this work, the bestseller (and popular film) "Holes."

## Raincreek Irrigation and Landscaping

This is the company for which Armpit works, and at which X-Ray eventually gets a job. Employment here is one of Armpit's "small steps" towards reclaiming his life after being interned at the Correctional Facility.

## The Twelve Concert Tickets

Armpit and X-Ray buy six tickets each for Kaira DeLeon's concert, and X-ray resells them ("scalps" them) for much more money than was paid for them. As a tool for illegally making money, the tickets and the money they represent are the catalysts for the novel's primary exploration of one of its key themes - the dangerous allure of money.

## Kaira's Letter

After meeting Armpit at her concert, Kaira sends him what amounts to a love letter which he discusses with X-Ray, who then discusses it with Felix, who then attempts to gain power over both Armpit and X-Ray by blackmailing them into giving it to him. The letter, like the tickets, is a catalyst not just for events in the plot, but also the narrative's thematic exploration of the corruptive power of money.



## **San Francisco**

Kaira invites Armpit to visit her while she's performing in the San Francisco area, the vibrant multiculturalism of the city serving as the backdrop/setting for both the real beginnings of their relationship and the fight that threatens to end it.

## **The Wellington Arms Hotel**

This is the hotel in San Francisco where Kaira and Armpit are staying, and is the setting for the novel's climax - the attack by El Genius on Kaira, and the rescues made by both Armpit and Fred the bodyguard.

## **Armpit's Sweatshirt**

Having not enough warm enough clothes for San Francisco (which is much cooler than Austin), Armpit is given a San Francisco sweatshirt by Kaira, who later, in a fit of anger, throws coffee all over it. As the novel concludes, Armpit notes that in spite of several washings, there are still coffee stains on the sweatshirt.

## **The Baseball Bat, the Cheese Knife**

These are the weapons used by El Genius in his attack. He uses the bat on Kaira and Armpit and the knife on Fred. Both weapons are prepared by El Genius with evidence that implicates Armpit in both crimes.





# Themes

## Moving Beyond the Past

This is the narrative's central theme, manifesting primarily in the experiences and stories of its two central characters, Armpit and Kaira. In terms of Armpit, the story makes it clear right from Chapter 1 that Armpit is determined to put his past (i.e. his criminal history, his stay in a juvenile correction facility) behind him and live a new, positive, productive life. The story not only shows him making efforts to do so, but also portrays the reasoning behind those efforts - specifically his realization, following a frank conversation with a counselor at the correctional facility, that he has to make changes in "small steps", taking one such step at a time. What's interesting about Armpit is how he doesn't always find it easy to do so, getting caught up in Armpit's undeniably criminal scalping scheme, then in lies to cover up that scheme, then in violence that results from those lies. In building on the idea of improving life by taking small steps, in fact, it could be argued that Armpit, throughout the narrative, is taking two steps forward and one step back - having a goal and taking action, but then being drawn back into the old ways, the old perspectives, and the old values. In Kaira's case, meanwhile, she doesn't have quite the same troubled past as Armpit, but she does have a similar desire to move beyond her troubled present (i.e. dominated financially, creatively, and personally by her stepfather/manager) into a better, more productive, more self-supporting future. By contrast to the journeys and experiences of both Armpit and Kaira, there is the character of X-Ray who, in his apparent determination to define his present and his future in terms that are themselves defined by his past, is both a defining contrast to Armpit and Kaira and an embodiment of one of the book's important secondary themes - the allure of money.

## The Allure of Money

Throughout the narrative, characters are drawn into corruptive, destructive schemes and plans that involve making money illegally. The first such plan is X-Ray's strategy to make money from scalping concert tickets, a plan in which Armpit becomes involved (albeit reluctantly) and which eventually, perhaps inevitably, serves to get them both in serious trouble, trouble with the potential to derail and destroy all of Armpit's efforts to rehabilitate his life. A similar set of outcomes awaits Kaira, who is the victim of the second notable plan to make money illegally - the plan conceived by El Genius and enacted, at least partially, with the help of his mistress Aileen to gain control of Kaira's money. This plan goes even further, in terms of its potential destructiveness, than X-Ray's, whose plan could, admittedly ruin his and Armpit's life, but does not have the potential to actually end a life, as El Genius' plan to kill Kaira and frame Armpit for the crime (and perhaps face a death penalty) does. In other words, while the potential end results of both plans are different, the motivation for both plans (i.e. financial success) is exactly the same - both X-Ray and El Genius want easy money, and are drawn to destructive actions (lying and cheating in the case of the former ... lying, assault and



murder in the case of the latter) in order to realize their goals. The fact that they are able to go as far as they do in order to realize those goals is the result of manifestations, in Armpit and Kaira, of the book's third major theme of trust.

## Trust

Issues of trust, both the need for it and the value of it, manifest in several ways throughout the narrative. Right at the beginning, Armpit is portrayed as trusting the comments and perspective of the counselor at the correctional facility (who advised him to take the process of rebuilding his life in small steps) and acting on that trust. He also, however, trusts X-Ray when he insists that they will profit greatly from the ticket scalping scheme - it's here that, for Armpit at least, trust veers into the territory of gullibility, his trust in X-Ray overwhelming trust in his own instincts. Armpit also has to deal with the lack of trust in his parents who, after the incident that took him to the correctional facility and his time there, are unable to trust him to be anything other than a criminal. Kaira, meanwhile, is forced by circumstances (i.e. her age, her mother's marriage, their mutual naivety) to trust in El Genius, whose greed and corruption lead him to betray that trust, with almost tragic results. Her sense of that betrayal, along with a need to be able to trust someone, are perhaps what lead her to rush into early, longing trust of Armpit, trust that leads her into incautious vulnerability that, in turn, increases her pain when she believes her trust in him has been betrayed. Juxtaposed with all these manifestations of betrayed trust is a tellingly contrasting example of complete, pure trust evidenced in Ginny MacDonald, whose trust in Armpit and his good will is absolute (a trust shared by her mother, herself a contrast in parental trust to Armpit's parents). One last example of how trust manifests in the narrative can be found in the relationship between Kaira and Fred the bodyguard, whom she doesn't want to trust or have to trust, but who proves he is worthy of that trust by enduring injury and attack for her.

# Style

## Point of View

The story is told from the third-person and omniscient point of view, exploring the story primarily from the perspective of protagonist Armpit but also diverting occasionally the perspectives and experiences of both Kaira and El Genius. These diversions essentially serve to add to the book's overall sense of suspense, of triggering in the reader a sense of curiosity about what's going to happen when the various narrative lines / subplots intersect (i.e. how are Kaira and Armpit going to meet, what's going to happen when Kaira finds out about El Genius). For the most part, though, the main point of view is Armpit's. The reader experiences events as he does, gets more information about his reactions and feelings than any other characters, and becomes more invested in the outcome of his story than anyone else's.

In terms of the book's overall thematic point of view, all three of its major themes are defined, to one degree or another, by the concept of personal integrity. A successful moving away from the past, for example, is portrayed (through the eventual actions of Armpit and Kaira) as being possible only when honesty and a sense of personal values are applied to all of one's choices. Genuine trust, it seems, is only rewarded when the person BEING trusted (i.e. Ginny, Armpit) acts/behaves with integrity. The allure of money, meanwhile, finds a fertile feeding ground in individuals with a LACK of integrity (i.e. X-Ray, El Genius). In other words, the book's overall thematic point of view seems to be an advocating of integrity, of honesty, reliability, and trustworthiness in the face of challenges from past mistakes, present corruption, and uncertainty about the future.

## Setting

There are several important elements to consider about the book's setting. Most of the action takes place in Austin, Texas, where Armpit and his friends and family live. Most specifically, it takes place in an underprivileged part of the city, where the atmosphere is one of lingering, ever-present, under the surface desperation to improve life. It's important to note that the narrative never hits this too hard, but it is there - in the passing descriptions of the city and the people whom Armpit encounters. It's certainly present in Armpit himself, and an important component of his desire/determination to prove his life. In any case, the relative lack of prosperity in Armpit's home setting makes the setting for his romantic getaway with Kaira (the beautiful, multi-cultural, exciting community of San Francisco) even that more attractive and / or compelling.

Another important element of the piece's setting is its placement in time and its broader placement in space - specifically, the contemporary United States, hyper-focused as it tends to be on celebrity (of the sort that Kaira DeLeon seems to enjoy - think Britney Spears) and/or on expansive financial success (of the sort desired by El Genius). Here, in this setting, can be found a relationship with the novel's thematic consideration of the



allure of wealth. On some level, celebrity and the attraction to it are, after all, all about the appeal of wealth, status and influence. Kaira herself, for all she says she wants to be normal, certainly behaves throughout the narrative as though it hasn't been that much of a hardship to get used to the celebrity lifestyle. This is a lifestyle to which El Genius would like to become even more accustomed and to which Armpit admits being attracted himself.

## Language and Meaning

For the most part, the language used in creating and defining the narrative is straightforward and accessible, appropriate to and for the book's central character. Like Armpit himself, the language used to tell his story is intelligent but not pretentious, the words, phrases, and sentence structures used in ways that communicate clearly and effectively without an over-emphasis on poetry or imagery, complicated structures, or impressive vocabularies. The point is not made to suggest that the writing is simplistic and just simple. Themes are similarly explored and addressed in a fairly straightforward way, with the book's primary thematic concern (the moving away from a difficult past into a better present and future) being clearly stated in the very first chapter - specifically, in Armpit's recollections of the lessons taught to him by the counselor at the Correction Facility. Again, the point is not made to suggest that this particular theme is not present in the book's line of action - on the contrary, everything that Armpit says and/or does is infused with his own awareness of what might be described as the theme of his life at this point. The book's other two themes (the allure of money and the power and value of trust) are likewise embodied in action, perhaps even more so, since the narrative never includes the kind of statements on either that it incorporates on the first. In other words, the book's meaning in relation to the first major theme is apparent in both narration and action, while meaning in relation to the second two themes is apparent almost exclusively through action, which many writing theorists would say is the point. Show, don't tell.

## Structure

The action of the novel, its essential narrative structure, is basically linear, moving from cause to effect, from action to reaction, in a straightforward, traditionally plotted way. Choices lead to consequences, which lead to further choices, which lead to more consequences, for all the characters throughout the two main narrative lines, the Armpit-and-the-tickets plot, the Kaira-and-El Genius plot which, because of its relatively smaller size, is in effect a sub-plot. Here it's important to note that the narrative as a whole develops these two plotlines in parallel, moving back and forth between events in the one and events in the other until they converge in Chapter 15, when Kaira visits Ginny in the medical center and Armpit essentially gets caught in the fallout of her (Kaira's) goodwill. Following that point of convergence, the two plots intertwine, events and choices and consequences in the one affecting and defining events and choices and consequences in the other until both reach their point of climax with the attack on Kaira by El Genius in Chapter 33. Then, and as previously discussed, the book's final few

chapters are essentially falling action and/or denouement, in which the story and its characters deal with the aftermath of the climax and the writer ties up any remaining loose ends (i.e. whether Armpit faces any criminal charges) while, at the same time, leaving a particular loose end (the question of what will happen between Kaira and Armpit) dangling, perhaps to be dealt with in a sequel.



## Quotes

"Once again Armpit was holding a shovel, only now he was getting paid for it, seven dollars and sixty five cents an hour...his shovel was short and had a rectangular blade, unlike the five-foot shovels with pointed blades he used when he was at Camp Green Lake Juvenile Correctional Facility" (Chapter 1, p. 1).

"[The counsellor] said his life would be like walking upstream in a rushing river. The secret was to take small steps and just keep moving forward. If he tried to take too big a step, the current would knock him off his feet and carry him back downstream" (Ibid, p. 4).

"1. Graduate from high school. 2. Get a job. 3. Save his money. 4. Avoid situations that might turn violent. And 5. Lose the name Armpit" (Ibid, p. 4).

"But as much as Armpit helped [Ginny], she helped him even more, She gave his life meaning. For the first time in his life, there was someone who looked up to him, who cared about him. Together they were learning to take small steps" (Chapter 3, p. 21).

"...its root was enormous. He first cut off the bush at the base, then started on the root, but no matter how deep he dug, he never could seem to get to the bottom of it. It was like an octopus with thick, long tentacles that hugged the ground" (Chapter 7, p. 51).

"Just hold on! / a little longer. / Just hold on! / a little bit longer / Hold on, baby / just a little bit longer / And then I'll be on my way" (Chapter 11, p. 80).

" 'I listen to the radio ... so much of what I hear is filled with anger and hatred. It's like guys think they have to be tough and cruel in order to be a man. To me, a man is someone who is brave enough to love, and to let himself be loved.'" Chapter 16, p. 116 - Kaira.

"Angry young mouth / spewing / Twisted cruel words / bout the / People you know / and the / Money you make / and the / Women you hurt / with your / hateful love!" (Ibid, p. 116 - 2).

"The song could have been about him a couple of years ago, before he went to Camp Green Lake. Although it wasn't really Camp Green Lake that released him from his anger. It was coming home and meeting Ginny" (Ibid, p. 117).

"For the first time in a long while, his mother looked at him and saw someone who maybe wasn't all bad" (Chapter 21, p 168).

" 'There are a lot of smart people in the world. Smarter than me. It's about recognizing your opportunities. It's about letting your opportunities come to you. Sometimes all you have to do is open the door and opportunity walks right in. It takes a genius to know when to open the door'" (Chapter 25, p. 194).



"Armpit had an image of himself cowering under a desk with plaster and bricks crashing around him and big gaps in the floor opening on all sides" (Chapter 29, p. 213).

"He had tried to take too big a step, and the current had knocked him off his feet and was washing him away. All his efforts, at school and at work, were for nothing. X-Ray would most likely go to jail, and he probably would too. For what? The whim of a rich and famous girl" (Chapter 32, p. 234).

"Not all of the moisture on her face came from the shower nozzle. Some of it came from thinking that nobody would ever like for who she was, only for what she was. She'd be glad when the concert started and she could lose herself in the songs. Singing about heartbreak and betrayal would come easy. She'd have to conjure up an imaginary person again for the love songs" (Chapter 33, p. 237).

"His fingerprints were on the bat. The knife came from his room. Her room key was found in his hotel suite. Traces of his blood and hair would be discovered in the next letter from Billy Boy. Then there was his prior criminal history, and the very public argument at the coffeehouse" (Chapter 35, p. 251).

"1. Graduate from high school. 2. Attend two years of Austin Community College. 3. Do well enough to transfer to the University of Texas (...he was considering studying occupational therapy, so he could help people like Ginny). 4. Don't do anything stupid. And 5. Lose the name Armpit" (Chapter 36, p. 257).



## Topics for Discussion

What are the symbolic parallels between the story of how Armpit got his nickname and how Armpit's life changed as the result of the encounter over the popcorn that landed him in the correctional center? Consider the fact that a scorpion's sting contains a kind of venom, or poison, that can have long-lasting effects on the person stung.

Identify the various parallels, literal and metaphorical, between Ginny and Kaira. What do they have in common? How do those commonalities manifest and reflect on their respective relationships with Armpit?

Why do you think Ginny's stuffed animals each have some kind of disability? What parallel is there, do you think, between the disabilities of the animals and Armpit's situation? In what way is Armpit "handicapped?"

Discuss the ways in which the lyrics from Kaira's songs ("Quotes," p. 80 and 116, as well as Chapters 28 and 36) reflect what's going on with Armpit.

Discuss whether you think Armpit should face consequences and/or receive punishment for his wrongdoing (i.e. scalping the tickets, lying to the police). Is saving Kaira's life enough redemption for him to not be punished? Or would you say losing Kaira is consequence enough (i.e. poetic justice)? Explain your answer.

Keeping in mind the book's three main themes, what do you think is represented by the coffee stains on Armpit's San Francisco sweatshirt?

Have you ever had, like Armpit, issues with an aspect of your past (either positive or negative) that have made it challenging for you to function in the present and/or move into the future? How did dealing with that past make you feel? How did you, or how do you think you might, transcend that past and create a new life/perspective for yourself?

How easy is it for you to trust? Have you ever had an experience where your trust was betrayed? How did that change or affect your ability to trust others? Would you say you're a trustworthy person? Discuss an incident in which someone felt you were worthy of trust. Discuss an incident in which someone felt you were unworthy of trust.

What are your feelings about money? Is it dangerous? Does having it make you happy? Do you want more? What would you be willing to do to GET more? What does money mean to you?